Further European cooperation in quality assurance in higher education

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This report discusses the progress in the development of quality assurance systems in Member States and on cooperation activities at European level, following the 2006 Recommendation.

Recall: quality assurance in higher education is at the heart of efforts to build a coherent, compatible and attractive European Higher Education Area (EHEA), in line with the objectives of the pan-European Bologna Process. The purpose of the 2006 Recommendation was to encourage higher education institutions (HEIs) to introduce or develop internal quality assurance systems and for quality assurance or accreditation agencies to apply the European Standards and Guidelines on Quality Assurance, in this area. The 2006 Recommendation invited the Commission to: (i) continue, in close cooperation with the Member States, its support for cooperation between HEIs, quality assurance and accreditation agencies, competent authorities and other bodies in the field; (ii) present triennial reports on progress in the development of quality assurance systems in the various Member States and on cooperation activities at European level.

This is the first triennial report on progress achieved. It analyses the situation at national, European and international level and suggests areas for further development.

Main conclusions: the report states that over the past few years, Europe's quality assurance system has developed enormously, both with respect to internal quality assurance in European HEIs and to external evaluation and accreditation of institutions and programmes. Many new quality assurance agencies and networks have been created, there is an increased awareness of the European Standards and guidelines on quality assurance and there are a growing number of agencies which prepare for quality assurance outside their national context.

Notwithstanding this overall positive development, the **full implementation of the 2006 Recommendation appears to require further efforts in a number of areas**.

Looking at the quality assurance infrastructure: quality assurance agencies are still a relatively new feature in the EHEA. They will need to demonstrate their independence and professionalism to build trust among stakeholders. They will further need to convince their European peers that they offer a sufficient level of comparability, which is important as a precondition for the cross-recognition of degrees and the promotion of student mobility.

The Commission is aware of the risk that agencies may have become too numerous while their size remains rather small. Therefore, the possibility of agency mergers might merit some consideration via the existing European quality assurance networks (ENQA, ECA), e.g. by regrouping agencies on the basis of regional or linguistic proximity. Agencies could also consider broadening the scope of their activities in order to deal more adequately with lifelong learning, distance, online, vocational, transnational and private higher education.

Revisiting the European Standards and Guidelines: the European Standards and Guidelines could be further developed, to make quality assurance more coherent with the development of the EHEA, as was envisaged in the 2006 Recommendation. This exercise would need to involve agencies and other quality assurance stakeholders within the Bologna Process framework. Such a development could consider the following three aspects:

1. **Complying with the main structure** (three cycles) as a basic quality requirement in the EHEA. A clearer reference in the guidelines should be given to the Diploma Supplement and the ECTS, since these are not fully implemented in most countries;
2. In the EHEA, the quality standards would encompass priorities such as **employability and mobility**;
3. The **standards for internal quality assurance systems** of HEIs might also factor in other key dimensions such as the quality of student services in general, career/employment guidance for students and alumni, the development of financial management capacity and the implementation of the European Charter for Researches and the Code of Conduct for the Recruitment of Researchers.

A stronger European dimension in quality assurance: the possibility for HEIs to choose from among registered agencies, as highlighted in the 2006 Recommendation, hinges on the development of a larger number of European quality seals. They could be based on broad disciplinary fields (rather than on narrow areas of professional specialisation) and awarded either by separate specialised agencies or in conjunction with national evaluations in the corresponding field. The Commission is supporting the development of initiatives of this type. National quality assurance agencies should be encouraged to develop activities beyond their borders and to seek the recognition of their decisions in other countries, e.g. through conventions of mutual recognition. HEIs could be encouraged to use the services of registered agencies outside their country. There may be a need to clarify the portability of national accreditation within the EHEA and also the issue of quality assurance for cross-border higher education within the EHEA. Given the growing importance **of joint and double degree** courses in Europe, clear principles might be useful to avoid the need for multiple accreditations.

The Commission supports the development of transparency tools complementing quality assurance, in particular those providing a comparative view on the quality of HEIs and their programmes.

Lastly, the Commission would like to invite all stakeholders to reflect on this report and to ensure the appropriate follow-up to the 2006 Recommendation. The Commission looks forward to being able to report on further progress in 2012.